

Zoos: Why a Revolution is Necessary to Justify Them

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When the Grey Squirrel Met the Siberian Tiger

Watching a Siberian tiger kill a grey squirrel for a half-hour proved to be one of my most enlightening experiences at a zoo. It was a weekday; I was alone, not even an employee passed by. The tiger pounced on the squirrel, flipped it into the air like a juggler's ball, pinned it and rolled it. A short reprieve from this unlikely encounter and the bloodied, half-crushed squirrel attempted an escape, dragging itself across the grass; the tiger watched curiously, let it go a few feet then pounced again. My whole self suffered over the squirrel's pain and torture while marveling in the same instance at the tiger's power, the ease with which it knocked the rodent along the ground. Here in an institution where nature is faked was a relatively truthful half-hour: nature's brutality, grace, ugliness, awe, beauty, and tragedy were revealed. I never could conclude whether the Asian terror was just playing or if it simply lacked the knowledge (as has been proven with many captive cats) to finish off the squirrel. Either way, it took a long time for the rodent to die.

At 28 years of age I have spent countless hours in well over twenty zoos spanning four continents. I present this fact as the main expertise I possess in writing an essay analyzing contemporary zoos and their visitors. That is to say, this is not an exploratory essay of a professional zoologist or biologist (or even a science major), rather this is one zoo-goer's and environmental reporter's view of the current state of zoos and, more importantly and rarely discussed, some general ideas that could transform the zoo's place in our society. This is my hope. Due to the desire to avoid a dissuadable length, I will not evaluate zoos separately (though of course they vary widely in quality), but rather sketch a general impression.

The True Purpose of Zoos

Think about it: the zoological park—in which living beings are subjected to strict confinement, where they must live a life, no matter the size and 'naturalness' of the cage, wholly different from the natural one to which they are suited, where their instincts are dulled, tamed, and corrupted: eating involves no hunting or foraging and sexual relations are interfered with and closely monitored—allows such seemingly needless suffering to

fellow creatures that we, as ethical (hopefully) animals, must not only supply a very good reason for this subjection, but also achieve it.

Zoos have a long history. China claims the first (as it does with most public institutions), but Egypt, Greece, and Rome all possessed zoos of a kind. However our contemporary zoos are direct descendants of Europe's first public zoos (replacing royal menageries meant only for the aristocratic class). A product of the European Enlightenment, late 18th Century zoos were built with the purpose to harbor animals for scientific purposes and public education. These were noble ideas, but it would be two-hundred years before zoos began to consider the health and sanity of its inmates. At the same time, circa 1960s and 70s, zoos began to rethink their general purpose. It was quite clear at this point that the earth was on the verge of a global extinction, called the Holocene Mass Extinction, and only strong efforts by scientists and societies at large could save the vast biodiversity of our planet. Contemporary zoological parks have added stipulations regarding species health and well-being, while embracing the idea that they must focus on conservation efforts worldwide and environmental education locally. This is a purpose that makes sense. In fact this is the only reason to allow such unnatural captivity: the zoo should be a local Conservation Center, focusing wholly on saving (or reinstating) species in the wild and on educating the public on the importance of conservation and biodiversity. AZA (the accrediting Association of Zoos and Aquariums) exists to make this happen, and there are many quality conservation programs going in and coming out of most zoos. My skepticism lies not so much with zoo's conservation programs, but with their effectiveness as educators.

Zoo: The Educational Institution?

It appears that most zoos believe the animals themselves are sufficient education: somehow by seeing a bear in a cage one will be environmentally enlightened. Yet what do captive animals—lacking context—teach one about the natural world and its importance? The zoo is an artificial 'wilderness'; it is man-made and man-managed. There is no connection between a pen and an ecosystem. A visitor can look through the glass and see an insect, a snake, a reptile and 'learn' nothing more than: they are boring, because they just sit there. In the same manner polar bears appear as playful, cute, and hardly menacing, though they can kill a two-hundred pound seal (or human) with one hit from the paw. Finally, it's difficult to wrap one's head around an animal being endangered when its three feet from you. Without context—without quality information in a wide variety of forms—zoos only teach us illusions regarding nature and conservation, yet many zoos still believe that the caged animal will say it all. If this were true then according to my experience the main prey of Siberian Tigers would be the North American Gray Squirrels.

Zoos have tried—a little—to incorporate education into the premier attraction. Some zoos are satisfied with a including fascinating fact about each subject: 'the chameleon can look in two directions at once!' or 'the kangaroo is the world's largest marsupial!' It's like if you went to see an exhibit on Van Gogh and all it said was 'he shot himself in the stomach!' Most zoos, however, have informative signs regarding the animal itself,

including habitat, feeding, mating, nominal behavior etc. Even when zoos offer more information, they expound upon the subject as though it lives in a vacuum: zoos rarely explain an animal's place in its ecosystem. Better information on this level would allow people to find more respect for animals (or plants) they usually ignore and avoid—reptiles, snakes, amphibians, insects, arachnids—and to gain new insight into the so-called charismatic species. A wide assortment of such information would help people understand why every part of an ecosystem is vital.

Conservation and Education

Since zoos embraced conservation, most include a display regarding the species' conservation status. Some are even enlightened enough to include the reasons behind the animal's endangerment. But even this proves hardly sufficient: when a visitor reads about logging in Sumatra or the bush-meat problem in Congo, what can they really do but shrug their shoulders in wonder and drop a quarter in a donation bin? Zoos need to take these conservation issues and make them applicable. If they want to stop logging in Borneo to save the orangutans, why doesn't the zoo provide a list of tropical woods to avoid purchasing? In addition, why don't they highlight that the rainforest isn't being cut for Borneo's needs, but western consumption? To tackle the bush-meat trade, zoos could address the larger issue of poverty in Africa. American policy can have a large effect on this issue. These are merely two examples of how to make wildlife conservation meaningful to the average visitor. The zoo, as a conservation center, must make visitors aware of their responsibility in fixing these global problems. For in the end it is lack of funds, awareness, and will that continually allows our world to be ravaged in unsustainable and wasteful ways.

To truly reach visitors, zoos should employ a variety of new educational strategies: signs in front of a cage are simply not enough. For example, I find it odd that science and art museums have continuously rotating exhibits, but zoos do not. Why not include such exhibits exploring a particular species, a famous wildlife expedition, or the state of our earth? Imagine an exhibit on birds of paradise, the journeys and writings of Peter Matthiesen, or the recent extinction of the Baiji. Quality and detailed exhibits may make some visitors excited by biology and conservation who are otherwise dispassionate to animals in cages. Displaying exhibits on conservation issues would kill two birds with one stone—excuse the completely inappropriate adage. Such exhibits could cover major topics like human population, rainforest deforestation, or global warming. And if zoos are serious about shaping minds regarding conservation they should be pursuing honest and effective information: the presentation should not wipe away the complexities of these issues nor avoid our responsibility in making the difference. In the end, as I have related, conservation information must include concrete steps that the visitor can do to make a difference.

A theatre that would play quality nature and conservation programs would be a perfect place for tired visitors to take a respite and learn something new. With amazing programming such as the recent Planet Earth—including its follow-up episodes on conservation—and David Attenborough's or National Geographic's wonderful

documentaries, it seems odd to me that zoos have not thought of this as a novel way to provide both entertainment and education. However, if the programs that are played have no interest in conservation and science, but merely display 'funny' or 'dangerous' animals to entertain than they are not worthy of what should be zoo's higher place in society.

While quality education may be lacking at most zoos, they are still doing great things in the conservation world. The Bronx Zoo, arguably one of the best zoos in the world, is run by the Wildlife Conservation Society which currently has 660 field projects running around the world. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) admirably bring zoos and conservation programs together around the country. But this leaves me with a question: why are these conservation initiatives not proclaimed? Why don't zoo visitors see information first-hand what their local zoo (or zoos across the world) are working on? I'm not talking about just a little plaque and a few words, but an in-depth description of the project and its goals. Let the visitor know that the zoo does not exist solely for their needs, but as a research institute and base for overseas conservation. Allow them to comprehend that animals are not mere entertainment for humans, but a vital part of ecosystems around the world that makes our earth as wondrous (and effective) as it is.

The Green Zoo?

Currently, most zoos are standing contradictions. They use tremendous amounts of dirty power and water daily, both for guests and animals. Zoo cafes serve largely unhealthy and purely unethical foods. One minute you could be walking through a rainforest exhibit and the next drinking coffee or eating chocolate, both of which are grown in tropical countries. Or you might have just read about the devastating impact of climate change on amphibians worldwide and then have a hamburger or hotdog for lunch (according to the UN livestock is responsible for 18 percent of greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere—5 percent more than global transportation). Munch on some chips while watching orangutans and despairing of their plight without even realizing the threat to them and innumerable other Asian species is in your mouth—palm oil (which can appear in products ranging from snack foods to cosmetics and shampoo). Palm oil has ravaged forests across south-east Asia over the last few decades, especially in Indonesia (which lost 24 percent of its forest in just fifteen years) and Malaysia (6.6 percent). Or shop in the gift store and buy something—pretty much anything—and you'll be supporting China's industrial and booming economy, which is run almost entirely on carbon emitting coal.

Imagine if the zoo put its ethics where its mouth is: power could be generated entirely from sustainable sources; water could be very carefully consumed, reused after treatment, and collected whenever it rains; the zoo restaurant could be filled with local foods; carrying chocolate and coffee that is both shade-grown and fair-trade (with explanations as to the importance of these distinctions) and offering a good selection of vegetarian meals. In addition it could make a point of carrying foods that either do not contain palm oil or carry eco-certified palm oil. The gift shop could sell materials that are only ethically and sustainably produced. Instead of gifts from Chinese sweat shops or Indonesian rainforests, we could be buying alpaca scarves from co-operatives in Peru or

hand-carved animals from recycled wood in Kenya. If a zoo cannot live by the standards it attempts to teach than our gluttonous society is perhaps beyond the point of help.

Obviously, many of these suggestions and ideas are dependent on funds. I am no economist but I imagine making a zoo 'green' would be expensive, but I also believe public benefactors and the government would quickly shore up funds for a 'green' zoo, and then tout that sustainability as an example to the public.

An Example of One Zoo's Incongruent Decision

Despite continuous opportunities for zoos to improve upon their mission statement of education and conservation, some of their decisions simply boggle the mind. In 2000 the Minnesota Zoo—the state in which I grew up—decided to add a new attraction: a giant barn with lots of domesticated animals. In what way does this meet goals of wildlife conservation and education? Here is the description from the website: "The objective of the Wells Fargo Family Farm is to create a place for Minnesota Zoo visitors to become part of a community of people, plants and animals striving to maintain balance with nature." That's all well and good, but these are not endangered species! There are a few rare breeds in the barn, but a domestic breed—genetically managed by and for man—is not an endangered species. These are not wild species: they have no habitat, no prey, no ecosystem—so why are they taking up zoo's money and resources? The barn, as well, features a unique exhibit: cloned farm animals. I almost have no words for this, for in whose devious mind does a cloned domestic breed of cattle inspire conservation?

This decision is odd for another reason. Minnesota already has several places one can go for this exact experience. Numerous small working farms incorporate educational programs for children and adult visitors. The decision by the zoo to spend 4.5 million dollars—yes, 4.5 million—on this farm complex (when it could have been using the money for overseas conservation, breeding programs, or any set of educational activities) is a direct threat to small family-farms that gain a lot of their livelihood from visitors.

This giant barn illustrates a final disturbing trend in zoos recently. You may have noticed the barn's evocative title: Wells Fargo Family Farm. I wonder if all the tellers at Wells Fargo came and did a barn-raising? Hardly, instead Wells Fargo shelled out 4.5 million dollars to build the barn. But why didn't any board members turn around and say that the money would be much better spent on something, say, conservational? And does anyone remember those days when companies would donate money without requiring their logo to appear everywhere?

Visiting zoos now is like walking through a set of commercials: 3M, Cargill Target, Walmart, Verizon, the list goes on. Even more ironic is the dubious, if not atrocious, environmental records of many of these corporations. Even on the Minnesota Zoo website, Wells Fargo has made its mark: just under an adorable picture of a girl feeding a calf with a bottle appears a direct link to Wells Fargo's. Such branding de-legitimizes zoos, as though these animals could (or should) be 'owned' by corporations. I don't know how we reached a point where this must be said, but aren't we overwhelmed with enough

advertisements than to add them into a public institution like a zoo? I look forward to the day when the library shelf sports an ad for Mountain Dew, the judge's bench proclaims Home Depot, and the church pew has Hallmark carved into its wood. Not only has the Minnesota Zoo strayed from conservation to build this fake monstrosity, but they sold themselves to a big, big bank. And, of course, at the end of any strange decision process—such as the one that led to a big barn plastered with Wells Fargo—lie clues, i.e. one of the board members of the zoo is the VP of Human Resources at Wells Fargo.

Where could the Minnesota Zoo have better spent 4.5 million? The options makes the mind reel: updating old exhibits, additional educational facilities, creating a new exhibit on a particularly threatened ecosystem, or how about a program that brings lower-income children and families to the zoo who can't afford the general admission price of \$14.00.

A Zoo is Not a Movie

Often, zoos are viewed by adults as a place for children, as though adults are too 'old' to learn anything from encountering other species. Zoos are also rarely thought of as a place of science or serious conservation. Visitors view zoos as a form of entertainment, something akin to a fluff movie, and most zoos have bought into that. Yet for the sake of the future, zoos need to rise above their self-belief and their public-perception that they are a carnival, something akin to a Disney movie or a theme park (like the ridiculous Disney's Animal Kingdom, in which the meld between theme park and zoo becomes so indistinguishable that animals are merely a backdrop to rides or confused with movie characters).

While our cultural fixation on entertainment and distraction is bad enough, it is a terrible thing when zoos place themselves in this category. To do so only perpetuates the idea that other species exist solely for our amusement and use (or abuse). Animals in zoos are not Disney characters; they do not speak English and tell funny jokes. Animals are true and real because they are not us. These species are not our slaves or property. We have no claim (moral or otherwise) for mastery over them. Yet, it was the expansion of this mostly-western philosophy of human dominance over pretty much everything that allowed previous generations to purposefully (or just lazily) bring species to the brink. One thinks of the American settlers who languidly shot bison from moving trains, killing at least 60 million animals (though they had an even more dubious reason added to boredom for this slaughter—our government wanted bison extinct to starve out Native Americans) or when the same Americans dropped the original population of two billion Passenger Pigeons to zero. The birds were ruthlessly hunted to provide low-quality meat to society's slaves, poor, and domestic animals.

Uniquely, we are a species that often destroys something for the sake of destruction or a desire to feel powerful. When I was a child I used to torture ants with a liquid blend of pesticides, toothpaste, whole milk, window cleaner, etc. I would watch them squirm and die for hours. I always felt bad when I did it, yet I still went ahead. This is the place where the view of life as entertainment leads us.

If one seeks pure entertainment, there are many other options than a zoo. This is not to say that one can't be entertained at a zoo, rather that such an experience should be complimented by education, awe, respect, and enlightenment. These are living and breathing beings, not pixels or stuffed bears. While western cultural humans may have a tradition of believing itself vastly superior to all other forms of life, seeing the breadth of a polar bear, the social organization of an ant colony, the unruffled beauty of an eagle, the gaze of a mountain gorilla, the deadliness of a copperhead should be an avenue to question such beliefs, not reinforce them.

Zoo's Effectiveness: Analysis of a Study

In 2007 AZA (Association of Zoos and Aquariums) published the findings of a survey that addresses many of the issues I have explored thus far. This survey, three years in the making, interviewed visitors from a total of twelve zoos and aquariums. They asked questions regarding educational experiences, conservation, and the place of zoos in society.

AZA, an extremely respectful and noble organization, view their findings as proof that "visits to accredited zoos and aquariums prompt individuals to reconsider their role in environmental problems and conservation action, and to see themselves as part of the solution." I am not surprised by their findings. Zoos do produce a lot of good. The problem however is that instead of looking at their findings and seeing the gaps for improvement, the conclusions of the paper state that all is well and good. They're playing Pollyanna.

Allow me to state why. First, when they state that visiting zoos and aquariums causes reconsideration of environmental problems and conservation actions in the visitor and the belief that we—humans—are apart of the solution, they really mean that 54 percent of visitors affirmed this. Fifty-four percent isn't bad, but it's hardly good. If we state that zoos are educational facilities and that their main focus is public education regarding conservation issues then how do these zoos seriously feel about failing 46 percent of the populace? While AZA sees this as a positive percentage, I only see it as proof that zoos are not doing enough—near enough—to change minds. I wish the AZA had followed up this question by asking visitors to then list the concrete steps they learned to lessen their impact on the environment.

Another curious finding from AZA's assessment was the results of a test given to adults to see if their knowledge of ecological concepts improved by visiting the zoo. Only 10 percent of visitors were found to have better knowledge of ecology after visiting the zoo. AZA states that this is because zoos underestimated the knowledge of the visitors. If this is the case, should they not be rushing to provide more and better information? If the visitors have graduated from Ecology 101, shouldn't zoos step it up to Ecology 201? After all, the more knowledge our populace has regarding ecology the better informed they will be in tackling complex issues like mass extinction and climate change. For decades, zoos have sufficed with the basics: name, habitat, a few sentences about behavior. Regarding conservation information it is more even pathetic. Inadequate

information is not enough anymore, and this study proves that clearly. People are ready (and they must) come face-to-face with complex issues like climate change, bio-fuels, the Holocene mass extinction, poverty, and conservation, but why just focus on the problems without solutions? You want to cut your carbon foot-print: eat less red meat, buy less stuff, eat local foods, turn down your thermostat, and purchase a vehicle that gets at least 45 miles-per-gallon. If I can list a few big things in one sentence, you'd think a zoo could do a lot more than that.

Ineffective Zoos Are Immoral

When confronted with a caged animal, let us say the beautiful snow leopard, my brain sometimes flashes to Edmund Dantes from *The Count of Monte Cristo*, falsely imprisoned for fourteen years (incidentally about the lifespan of a snow leopard) that lead to madness and a desperate escape. Just because these are not humans in prison, does not mean that animals in the zoo do not 'feel' their confinement. Have you ever seen a polar bear pace back and forth, back and forth? That is called stereotypic behavior and has been compared to an insane man's ticks. Gorillas will pound on glass walls (and occasionally escape). Tigers (who in the wild may have a territory of over 50 square miles) patrol the same small acre incessantly. Primates may appear listless and withdrawn or overtly active from stimulants to keep zoo-goers happy. An eagle may have nothing more to do all than sit on a single perch and defecate (most zoo birds no longer have the ability to fly, something that would instantly doom them in their natural habitat). No matter how much someone wants to dismiss the 'intelligence' or 'awareness' of these animals (and this is becoming increasingly difficult with new scientific studies), one cannot argue against the fact that they are living a life to which they are not at evolved. These are not tame animals; it took humans centuries, perhaps millennia, to turn the now extinct aurochs into the fatter, duller, blanker cattle we see on farms today: animals so far from their ancestors that they can only survive in managed environments. Putting wild species in a managed environment is akin to a sane man locked in a madhouse.

If wild animals are not allowed to strike awe in the visitor and to educate them about what decisions they (or their governments) make that affect their wild relatives than their incarceration is not merely reasonless, but criminal. These animals are ambassadors for wilderness, for a bio-diverse earth, for the planet as it is (or even as it was). This is not a role they have chosen, but one we have forced upon them. Zoos have a moral obligation to achieve the most good out of this sad state of affairs.

Final Thoughts

An animal is worth more than a masterwork of art or an archeological treasure, simply because it lives. It breathes, it eats, it sleeps, it thinks, one day it will die; its true nature is impenetrable, because we can only view it through our own prejudices and limitations as humans.

I realize at times I probably sound terribly dour and that my ideas would suck all the fun out of any zoo experience, making it dim and serious. I am quite aware of this personal

stuffiness: my wife likes to say that I am a 'zoo snob'; I don't deny the possibility. But I do not mean that a zoo experience should not be enjoyable. Experiencing the zoo should never become any less fun than it already is, rather it should be given the added dimensions of awe and education, of respect and a higher purpose to save the vastness of life on this planet, and in turn save ourselves.

For me, I am a quiet zoo-goer. It is almost a spiritual experience for me. I stand before an animal—unique and beautiful—and I undergo a sense of meaning and rejuvenation. It is a strange thing to experience such emotions while the source of them is locked in a cage, but there it is. I understand those who can find no joy in a zoo and those who see zoos as cruel (inherently they are), and I would stand and protest with them, if not for the fact that all other species are in the midst of a devastating ecological crisis, and it may only be these caged ambassadors who make people wake-up and act. But the institution has responsibilities that should no longer be overlooked. Remember the next time you visit the zoo, to stare an animal in the face and to know that the only reason this animal is where it is... You.

You and me and all of us are the reason these animals sits behind glass or bars; we are reason only a fraction of their habitat remains; we are the reason they have been driven to almost nothing; and may very well—sooner than we can imagine—be extinct and gone, forever flung from living. What right do we have to this? And what right do zoos have to exist, if not to show us our illusion of mastery, our waste of creation, and our responsibility to make it right—as right as it can be? The zoo—if only it lived up to its purpose—could play a leading role in the preservation of creation, the saving of life. I hope it will take up its mantle, and leave-by the many immaturities that still plague it.

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